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Asian Americans During The Cold War

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Finding a Path Forward

**ASIAN AMERICAN PACIFIC ISLANDER
NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS THEME STUDY**

Edited by Franklin Odo





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Essay II



Asian Americans: The Cold War

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The allied victory in World War II set into motion a series of political and cultural realignments that produced new challenges and opportunities for Asian Americans. The wartime service of both Asian Americans and Asian nationals who were part of the allied military coalition impelled U.S. policymakers to modify some of the more notorious exclusionary laws that targeted Asians. Government policies that discriminated against population groups based on race came under new scrutiny during the war, insofar as America's enemies (e.g. Germany, Japan) so explicitly embraced insidious race doctrines to justify their belligerent actions. Importantly, the long-standing policy of barring Asians from naturalized citizenship on racial grounds was dismantled in a piecemeal fashion in response to international criticism of the chauvinistic treatment of Asian immigrants in the United States. Public narratives extolling the patriotic

Wedding reception for Olinda Saito and Sgt. Raymond Funakoshi at the American Club in Tokyo, Japan. From left: Olinda Saito's mother, Olinda Saito (bride), Shiuko Sakai, Capt. Waddington and Capt. Humphries. Shiuko Sakai, the donor, organized this wedding party for Olinda Saito, with whom she worked at the U.S. Army language school. Photo courtesy of the Densho Digital Repository.



contributions of Asian Americans during the war provided an opening to challenge many of the entrenched stereotypes (e.g. disloyal, unassimilable, clannish) that relegated them to the margins of U.S. society. Asian American community leaders touted their wartime service as evidence of their “Americanness” and demanded, with some success, greater civil rights and recognition as a reward for their sacrifices. This outpouring of goodwill, however, proved tenuous and quickly gave way to a new set of racial tropes that shaped the experience of Asian Americans during the early Cold War era.

GEO-POLITICS AND THE POSTWAR GLOBAL ORDER

Shifting geopolitical configurations that took hold after the war led the United States to focus much of its foreign policy attention on developments in Asia. A high-stakes rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union to shape the character of the postwar international order was a defining feature of this period. The proliferation of communist-led political movements in China, Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia worried U.S. officials who viewed the Pacific World as a key battleground for influence in the postwar political order. The triumph of Chinese Communists over the U.S.-backed Kuomintang in 1949 signaled the urgency of the issue and spurred American policymakers to step up efforts to contain the spread of radicalism in the Asia-Pacific region. The Communists’ victory spawned an exodus of Chinese refugees out of the country, a significant number of whom would eventually migrate to the United States. Their pedigree as foes of Mao Zedong’s regime provided a useful propaganda tool to contrast the freedoms offered in the United States with the “tyranny” represented by the communist way of life.¹

The “loss” of China prodded U.S. lawmakers to aggressively pursue President Truman’s “containment doctrine” to stem the spread of communism in the region. U.S. involvement in the Korean War in 1950 was an early test of this approach. While the Korean War ultimately ended in a stalemate in 1953, the conflict had a major impact on Americans’ perceptions of Asia and the war’s reverberations would impact the formation of Asian American communities during this period. Not surprisingly, racialized depictions were commonplace in American media coverage of the war, rekindling the well-worn “gook” discourse to dehumanize the North

Koreans. Moreover, China’s entry into the war on the North Korean side reinforced long-standing stereotypes characterizing Asians as an “enemy race” that threatened to destabilize the global political order.² The pervasiveness of this sentiment was best captured in the popular novel and later Hollywood film, *The Manchurian Candidate*, which portrayed sinister Asian communist officials orchestrating a plot using a brainwashed Korean War veteran to bring down the U.S. government.

Among the war’s unintended consequences was the arrival of thousands of Korean “war brides,” as well as the influx of Korean adoptees into the United States. Special wartime legislation allowed U.S. servicemen to bring Korean wives and/or fiancées into the country, exempt from normal quota restrictions. This followed on the heels of previous provisions enacted in the aftermath of World War II that allowed American GIs to sponsor their fiancées whom they met while stationed in Japan, China, and the Philippines. Tens of thousands of Asian women entered the United States during the 1940s and 1950s via these wartime policies setting into motion a dramatic shift in the gender composition of the postwar Asian immigrant cohorts. Along similar lines, the plight of Korean orphans displaced by the war captured the nation’s attention in the 1950s, generating a new discourse in which Asian children became needy targets of American benevolence. The fact that many of the orphans were of mixed race parentage abandoned by their American GI fathers gave their predicament an added urgency. The arrival of tens of thousands of Korean adoptees in the U.S. in the decades following the war created a new set of challenges as the majority of the newcomers were transplanted into white American families who had little knowledge of their children’s heritage or of the difficulties adoptees would face navigating the politics of race in the United States. Asian adoptees would become an important constituency in the Asian American community, raising new questions about the boundaries of belonging in the U.S. Both of these populations would serve as harbingers of demographic and cultural changes that helped to redefine the place of Asian Americans in the Cold War era.³

The containment doctrine was also deployed to suppress a popular insurgency in the Philippines during the early 1950s. The United States took a particular interest in preventing its former colony from “going red” so



Carlos Bulosan, was a Filipino American author, poet, and activist. Bulosan gained much recognition in mainstream American society following his 1944 publication, *Laughter of My Father*. Known as an avid chronicler of the Filipino American Experience from the 1930s to the early 1950s, he could be very outspoken in his writing. Eventually, his outspokenness got him blacklisted and hounded by the FBI. Photo courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW513.

soon after it was granted national independence in 1946. The Hukbalahap (Huk) movement began as an anti-Japanese guerilla force during World War II and eventually merged with the Communist Party of the Philippines in 1950. Political disaffection spread across the archipelago in the years immediately following the war, due to efforts to rebuild the nation's devastated infrastructure, and the economy stalled. The American and Philippine military establishments worked closely together to curb the growth of the Huks, whose program for land reform and wealth distribution resonated with the nation's large landless peasant population. Huk calls for the removal of American military bases in the islands were viewed as a direct threat to U.S. geopolitical interests in Asia.⁴

THE WAR AT HOME

U.S. officials were particularly troubled by the emergence of transnational networks linking Filipino American activists and radicals in the Philippines. The celebrated writer, Carlos Bulosan, was a high profile backer of the Huks and worked to mobilize support for their campaign among American leftists. His ties to radicals in the Philippines put him on the radar of U.S. and Philippine intelligence agencies, and the FBI conducted surveillance on Bulosan and other Filipino American activists. Intercepted correspondence between Bulosan and Philippine leftists Luis Taruc and Amado Hernandez alarmed U.S. authorities, who aggressively targeted Filipino American labor leaders, especially those associ-

ated with the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU). The Seattle branch of the ILWU had a large Filipino membership that worked in the Alaska salmon canneries. The union's leadership was known for their militancy on a range of issues including critiques of imperialist U.S. foreign policy, institutionalized white supremacy, and the unchecked power of big business in setting the nation's economic agenda. The union's Filipino leadership (including Bulosan) was targeted by federal authorities for their alleged communist sympathies, and hundreds of members were arrested and faced potential deportation for their subversive political beliefs. On the domestic front, federal authorities used aggressive persecution of Filipino American labor leaders to stifle their political activities. On the international front, the United States sent special military advisors to the Philippines and used the archipelago as a testing ground for novel counterinsurgency tactics that would later be used to suppress guerilla movements in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. By the mid-1950s the Huk rebellion was defeated and their Filipino American allies who helmed the Seattle branch of the ILWU were isolated and bankrupted by constant legal harassment from the federal government.⁵

Similarly, Cold War paranoia about the infiltration of Chinese leftists in the United States prompted the federal government to initiate the so-called Chinese Confession Program. The initiative was designed to draw undocumented Chinese immigrants out of the shadows by offering a path to permanent residency if they registered with the federal government. U.S. officials believed that the Act would allow the domestic intelligence agencies to track political activities among Chinese immigrants and root out potential pro-communist sympathizers who might then be deported. Not surprisingly the Confession Program sowed mistrust in the Chinese community, and the threat of deportation drove many Chinese activists even further underground.

CULTURAL CONFIGURATIONS

The Cold War atmosphere of superpower rivalry and paranoia certainly fueled anticommunism domestically, but also promoted cultural conformity and suspicion of foreign influence. At the same time, Americans showed growing interest in Asia and Asian peoples. This period witnessed a boom in travel writings about Asia, along-

side a deluge of films, books, and magazine articles about the “Orient” and its place in the global order. Popular film and stage offerings like *Sayonara*, *Satan Never Sleeps*, *Flower Drum Song*, *The King and I*, *American Guerilla in the Philippines*, and *South Pacific* depicted the complex mix of curiosity, paranoia, and cosmopolitanism that characterized Cold War liberalism. While the representations of Asians in the United States showed signs of progress, troubling racial attitudes still bubbled beneath the surface. Two of the most iconic Asian cultural figures of this era, Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, illustrate how these parallel narratives played out. Fu Manchu was a popular television and movie character based on the pulp novels of Sax Rohmer. The 1956 television series *The Adventures of Dr. Fu Manchu* was followed by a run of films in the 1960s that developed a loyal box office following. The Fu Manchu character was an archetype of the cunning “Oriental” villain who sought to infiltrate and ultimately destroy Western civilization. The character embodied a Cold War version of “yellow peril” discourse, depicting Asians as perpetual foreigners whose capacity to assimilate into Western institutions was suspect.⁶

By contrast, Charlie Chan represented the other pole of Asian cultural representation during the Cold War. The Chan character was a Chinese American detective who worked for the Honolulu Police Depart-

ment, solving crimes through a combination of hard work and “Oriental” guile. The Charlie Chan franchise originally began as a pulp novel and was later featured in dozens of Hollywood films, a television series, radio program, and numerous comic books. Chan personified a distinctive type of “otherness,” the good Asian who was hard working, compliant, and averse to political protest, despite the racial barriers that he faced in the United States. Chan’s unflappability in the face of racial insults and his self-effacing persona made him an appealing figure to Western audiences who enjoyed his unique mix of foreignness and accommodation to Anglo-Saxon cultural authority. These attributes came to be associated with the “model minority” stereotype that would become an important political trope during this period.⁷

RACIAL TRIANGULATION AND THE INVENTION OF THE MODEL MINORITY

The term “model minority” was coined by sociologist William Peterson in 1966, who contrasted the socio-cultural attributes of Asian Americans with the traits ascribed to other population groups, in particular African Americans and Latinos. While alarmist depictions of Asians as an insular and ultimately unassimilable population remained entrenched, a newer discourse upholding Asian Americans as an ideal or “model” minority group gradually gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s. Asian Americans were portrayed as relatively disinclined to protest and confrontation in an era characterized by racial strife and political agitation. Instead, they embraced conventional American values of hard work, conformity, and socio-economic achievement notwithstanding their encounters with discrimination. The model minority narrative highlighting the postwar mobility of Asian Americans had a two-pronged effect. First, it suggested that racial boundaries were permeable as long as minority groups worked hard, acculturated, and did not hold a grudge about their historical mistreatment in the United States. Second, it served as a powerful indictment of other minority groups, especially Blacks and Latinos, who were compared unfavorably with Asian Americans. The continued marginalization of these groups was attributed to their deficient values and/or lack of work ethic. Consequently, the civil rights claims advanced by these groups have been dismissed as without merit.⁸



Dr. C. K. Liang, a senior technical expert chemist, working in the Chemistry Division Laboratory of the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. Dr. Liang was sent to the U. S. by the Chinese government under the auspices of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration to work on various research projects and study post-war problems. Photo by J. Sherrel Lakey, November 1944; courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Public narratives extolling Asian American success was viewed by many as a positive development that signaled an improvement over the negative racial assessments of Asians that characterized earlier eras. The deployment of the model minority discourse in the ensuing decades, however, produced a complex *mélange* of stereotypes that further cemented the insider/outsider status of Asian Americans. The prevailing account of the model minority success story focused on the cultural attributes of Asian immigrant groups as the primary source of their socio-economic attainment in the United States. Vaguely defined “Confucian” values are typically cited as a central explanation for Asian immigrant adaptation, especially the focus on familial obligation and educational achievement. This emphasis on “exotic” cultural characteristics as the driving force behind Asian immigrant mobility has, over time, reproduced the perception of Asians in the U.S. as perpetual foreigners whose adaptation strategies are counterposed (and viewed in competition) with Western traditions. Moreover, the suggestion that Asians are distinguished from Blacks and Latinos in the value they place on family, education, or hard work is a suspect claim not supported by social scientific evidence.

The evolution of the model minority designation in the ensuing decades intersected with the shifting contours of the postwar racial order, in particular the claim that the United States was becoming a “post-racial” society. On one side, opponents of Great Society policies argued that the socio-economic mobility of Asian Americans controverted the need for robust civil rights enforcement. Critics of the model minority discourse, on the other hand, suggested that media depictions of Asians as exemplary citizens actually reinscribed racial boundaries and obscured structural obstacles that delimited access to the American mainstream. Media narratives extolling the achievements of Asian Americans propounded a very narrow definition of success, focusing on educational and economic attainment while glossing over their continued marginalization in the political and cultural spheres. Furthermore, the model minority discourse ignored large segments of the Asian American community whose experiences diverged markedly from the success story attributed to Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. Filipinos, Cambodians, Laotians, Bangladeshi, Hmong, and Vietnamese

have lagged behind other Asian groups in terms of educational outcomes and socio-economic attainment and faced a variety of institutional barriers (e.g. underfunded public schools, residential segregation, labor market segmentation) that inhibited their integration into the American mainstream.⁹

THE 1965 IMMIGRATION ACT AND ITS UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

Major shifts in U.S. immigration policy during the Cold War played a central role in Asian Americans’ transition from “yellow peril” to the “model minority” group during this period. Restrictive immigration and nationality controls targeting Asians had been a recurring feature of U.S. border enforcement dating back to the late 19th century. The explicit use of racial selection in public policy, however, was widely discredited after World War II due to its association with the Nazi regime. Additionally, public recognition that the mass internment of Japanese Americans during the war was driven by overzealous racial paranoia put pressure on political leaders to improve relations with Asian American communities. U.S. officials moved to address charges of systemic discrimination as part of a larger program aimed at improving ties with Asian countries and resolving the glaring incongruity between the “*herrenvolk*” democracy practiced at home and the egalitarian democracy that the United States promoted overseas. The passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952 offered one noteworthy effort to address the legacy of anti-Asian chauvinism in U.S. law. The Act formally eliminated Asian exclusion as a staple of American immigration and naturalization policy as part of a larger effort to deflect international criticism of discriminatory treatment against non-white minorities. The overall impact of the McCarran-Walter legislation on immigration, however, was negligible since it allotted only token quotas to Asian countries that continued to hold a disadvantaged status under the “national origins” formula established in the 1920s.

Pressure to liberalize U.S. immigration policy continued to build, and key American policymakers argued that the long standing system predicated on ethnic selection was a diplomatic liability, insofar as it codified a hierarchy of desirable (Western European) and undesirable (Asian, Southern and Eastern European) population groups. A coalition of ethnic organizations, church

groups, and labor unions lobbied Congress to overhaul U.S. immigration policy, criticizing the chauvinistic underpinnings of the current system with a particular emphasis on the ways in which restrictive quotas impeded the ability of certain ethnic groups from reuniting with their overseas kin. Liberals achieved a major legislative victory with the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Act, which was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson at Ellis Island on October 3, 1965, at *Liberty Island, New York* with the Statue of Liberty serving as the ceremonial backdrop. The 1965 Act signaled a strategic shift in U.S. immigration policy dismantling the infamous “national origins” quota system that favored Western European immigrants at the expense of those from other parts of the world. A new selection regime was implemented that gave admissions preference to the relatives of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents to facilitate “family reunification.” The Act also privileged highly skilled, educated individuals crucial to maintaining the economic supremacy of the United States in the Cold War political order.¹⁰

A surge in immigration from Asia was an unexpected consequence of the 1965 Act since family preference categories were allotted the largest number of yearly quota slots. Asians made up less than 1 percent of the U.S. population in 1965, so lawmakers did not anticipate that they would benefit significantly from this policy feature. The Hart-Celler Act, however, in tandem with smaller piecemeal policy measures, including adjustments to the U.S. refugee policy, ushered forth a new stream of arrivals that would reshape the demographic composition of the Asian American community in important ways. The majority of new entrants came from five countries: China (including Taiwan), India, South Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Population pressures and economic instability functioned as a push factor driving emigration from these states to more prosperous parts of the globe. Statistical models cited by reformists suggested that there would not be an appreciable increase in the volume of Asian immigration to the United States resulting from the new legislation; that turned out to be a miscalculation. Asians took advantage of the 1965 Act’s family reunification provisions, engaging in what is popularly known as “chain migration” whereby recent immigrants sponsored close relatives, who after attaining permanent residency in the U.S.

promptly sponsored their own family members.

The post-1965 immigrant population was disproportionately drawn from the more affluent sectors of the primary sending countries in Asia. Many of those who settled in the United States during the early decades of the Cold War were professionals, e.g. Filipino nurses recruited to fill labor shortages at American hospitals, Chinese and Taiwanese students and scientists fleeing communism, Korean entrepreneurs, and Indian engineers. The new arrivals, on the whole, had more formal education than earlier generations and entered the U.S. with strong co-ethnic networks that enhanced their labor market prospects. Asian immigrants admitted to the United States after 1965 have been “highly selected” with much greater levels of education than their co-ethnics left behind. That such a large percentage of Asians entering the U.S. during this period had a college degree and were tied into professional networks upon arrival is the single greatest contributor to the socio-economic ascendance of Asian Americans. Importantly, the “hyper-selectivity” regime spawned by the 1965 Immigration Act has generated significant material advantages even for less educated, working-class co-nationals who have benefitted from the ethnic institutions, like rigorous after-school programs, college preparatory academies, and community associations, that enabled newcomers to navigate key societal institutions, e.g. schools, banks, real estate. The passage of the 1965 Immigration Act marked a pivotal turning point that reconfigured the character and composition of Asian American communities. Key changes to U.S. immigration law combined with Cold War geo-political rivalries and global wage differentials between the United States and sending countries reveal that it was this confluence of structural forces, rather than Asian cultural traits, that best explains the socio-economic gains of Asian Americans from the 1970s to the 1990s.¹¹

ASIAN AMERICAN POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Economic and educational gains experienced by many Asian Americans have not been accompanied by a concomitant increase in political power. Asian Americans have a long history of political mobilization in the United States, dating back to debates of Chinese exclusion in the 19th century and continued into the early decades of the 20th century, expressed in union



Standing to the far right, Representative Robert Matsui at a press conference on civil rights. Matsui was a third generation Japanese American, whose family was sent to the Tule Lake Relocation Center when he was six-months-old. Matsui eventually graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and became a lawyer. As a representative in Congress, Matsui was a fierce advocate for the approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans sent to relocation centers. Photo by Susana Raab, December 12, 1997; courtesy of the Library of Congress.

activism among agricultural workers and legal challenges to various exclusionary measures targeting Asian Americans. Political activism among Asian Americans took a variety of forms during the Cold War and was indelibly shaped by conservative culture of the period. The late 1960s witnessed the rise of what is popularly known as the Asian American Movement, which was part of the larger civil rights mobilizations of the 1960s and 1970s. Asian American college students catalyzed by the progressive tenor of the era confronted issues of institutional racism, chauvinistic U.S. foreign policy toward Asia, and socio-cultural disenfranchisement. Many of these young political actors grew up navigating ingrained stereotypes that pegged them as ineradicably foreign, politically passive, and conformist. This generation of activists rallied around opposition to U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, as well as their embrace of the radical wing of the Civil Rights Movement. Key organizations included the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) founded in 1968 in Berkeley, California; Asian Law Caucus (ALC); Kearny Street Workshop; and the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP). Asian American activists played a key role in the Third World Liberation Front, a multiracial coalition of students who orchestrated a campaign at San Francisco State University in the late 1960s to integrate the contributions of minorities to American society and culture into the university curriculum. This campaign eventually led to the institutionalization of Ethnic Studies programs at colleges across the country.¹²

By the 1970s Asian Americans began making inroads into electoral politics, seeking to capitalize on the advances of the civil rights movement and to give greater voice to immigrant communities that were largely ignored by the political establishment. Despite

some important electoral successes for Asian Americans in Hawai'i after the granting of statehood in 1959 (Daniel Inouye, Hiram Fong, Patsy Mink), expanding political clout on the U.S. mainland proved far more difficult. Relatively small population numbers and low voter turnout hampered early efforts to gain electoral traction. California, which had the largest population concentrations of Asian Americans on the U.S. mainland, was the site of some important political victories in the 1970s with the elections of Norman Mineta and Robert Matsui to the House of Representatives and S.I. Hayakawa to the U.S. Senate. Both House leaders carried a large percentage of the Asian American vote and importantly had the backing of influential community organizations, like the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). Political gains at the national level stalled during the 1980s due in part to the revival of racial animus directed toward Asian Americans during a period of growing anxiety about economic competition from Japan and China. The success of Japanese automakers in the U.S. market in the early 1980s, alongside the influx of cheap textiles and electronics from China in the late 1980s and early 1990s, generated a significant backlash, and the political loyalties of Asian Americans were frequently viewed with suspicion. While the intensity of anti-Asian sentiment waned by the mid-1990s, the perception of Asians as perpetual foreigners in the United States was an enduring feature of American life.¹³

CONCLUSION

By the end of the Cold War period, Asian Americans had made some significant strides in educational and economic attainment that have improved their standing in American society. By the early 1990s, Asian Americans were hailed for spurring a revitalization of urban

areas, as Asian ethnic enclaves became popular sites of commercial and cultural expansion. At the same time, they still faced obstacles in achieving political power, and enduring stereotypes about Asians relegated them to the margins of the culture industry. Asian American activists and elected officials challenged long-standing stereotypes about political passivity and conformity, and they mobilized local level political blocs that revealed a dynamic and diverse community demanding a greater stake in American society. The full integration of Asian Americans into U.S. society remains a work in progress, and stereotypes from the Cold War era have proven difficult to dislodge. The “forever foreigner” remains salient; even today, people of Asian descent regularly get asked “where they are from?” and are often expected to serve as cultural translators to their non-Asian peers. Moreover, Asian Americans remain severely underrepresented in U.S. popular culture, yet are often left out of discussions about the need to diversify the cultural industry (films, popular music, sports). The in-between status of Asian Americans, neither fully included nor totally excluded, in American society serves as an important reminder about the stubborn persistence of Cold War racial constructions and the importance of reckoning with this complicated history to develop a more nuanced understanding of diverse challenges Asian American communities face in the 21st century.

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